

Presidential Politics after the Clintons

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After a period of a few weeks when Hillary Clinton and her husband had receded from the political scene somewhat, they have been back in the news during the last few days. Party insiders claimed that Bill Clinton was a little "miffed" at his treatment by the Obama campaign, while Hillary Clinton returned to the senate for the first time since ending her presidential bid and made her first public campaign appearance in support of Barack Obama. Clinton's return to the senate seemed to go well, but she certainly would have preferred to return as her party's presidential nominee, rather than just the junior senator from New York.

Bill Clinton's lack of immediate visibility on the campaign trail in support of the man who defeated his wife in a close and not always friendly primary is understandable and not altogether surprising. More surprising, and telling, was that Clinton's silence was not really considered a story until his office announced the former President's less than enthusiastic endorsement of Obama, and the revelation that he was somewhat "miffed". Clinton's absence from the campaign was barely noticed, further demonstrating that the Democratic Party is now firmly in the post-Clinton era.

The recently completed primary was bruising and few of the main players, including the former president, avoided getting a little beat up. Clinton, it could be argued did most of this himself through his gaffes, outbursts and, arguably, racially tinged remarks. He is clearly no longer the unequivocally positive asset he has been to previous Democratic candidates since leaving office in 2000. Nonetheless, Bill Clinton's support will be welcomed by the Obama campaign; and any campaigning he is willing to do will be sufficient, although perhaps not necessary.

In recent campaigns, Bill Clinton has worked to turn out the African American vote for various Democratic candidates. It is hard to argue that Barack Obama needs help from Bill Clinton, or anybody else, in this area. More significantly, Bill Clinton himself no longer enjoys the political profile, even among Democrats, that he did a year ago. In short, Bill Clinton's involvement is not essential for Obama the way it was for Senator Clinton in the primaries or for recent Democratic presidential nominees such as Al Gore or John Kerry. Obama would probably benefit from Clinton's support, but he does not need it in the way his predecessors have.

Hillary Clinton is, of course, in a somewhat different situation. Although it is unlikely she will ever be president, she still has a senate career, and will likely become more influential in that body as she moves away from her presidential ambitions, gains in seniority and helps her party establish itself more firmly in the majority. Moreover, Clinton has secured her place in history. When we elect our first woman president, she will certainly be standing on the shoulders of Hillary Clinton. Through her gracious and enthusiastic, if somewhat delayed, endorsement of Obama, Clinton has begun to undo some of the damage she had done to herself in the waning

weeks of the Democratic Primary. Accordingly, her first campaign appearance with Barack Obama was an important media events.

All that being said, it is hard to believe that a month ago Hillary Clinton was a central player in national politics and that the media was filled with stories about what she might want or what leverage she might have over the her party's presidential nominee. These stories have dissipated somewhat because of Hillary Clinton's strong support for Obama, but there is more to it than that. Obama's strength and the speed with which, once they finally moved, the party leadership closed ranks around the nominee in June, have made it hard for Hillary Clinton to remain quite so relevant.

Hillary Clinton's return to the presidential campaign as a supporter of her party's nominee, moreover, is somewhat obscured by the efforts of her campaign to retire her substantial debt, estimated at around \$20 million. It is no coincidence that Obama's gesture of support and conciliation, to contribute the legal limit to help retire Clinton's campaign debt, became public on the morning that Clinton was to make her first public appearance with Obama. This underscores how much has changed in the last month for Hillary Clinton and how little leverage she actually has.

If President Clinton is upset by his treatment by the Obama campaign, one can only imagine how Obama feels about having to contribute and help raise money to reduce the campaign debt which was accrued by an erstwhile primary opponent largely after the point in the election when it was clear she had virtually no chance.

For almost twenty years, the Clintons were the dominant family in the Democratic Party. Even after Bill Clinton's presidency ended, this remained true for almost a decade, but in a period of just a few months this has changed. As recently as a year ago, the Clinton's were on the verge of establishing a political dynasty as Hillary Clinton was the leading candidate for president and Bill Clinton remained the most popular leader in the Democratic Party. Today Hillary Clinton has to turn to the man who defeated her for help paying back money her campaign owes, while her husband seems all but absent from the presidential campaign, but very few people, even Democrats seem to really notice or be too upset by this. There is something poignant about seeing the Clintons in their latest iteration. It is not yet clear precisely what their role will be in American politics going forward, and a couple as savvy, accomplished and competitive as the Clintons should never be discounted too easily, but it is almost certain that they will no longer be the central figures in the Democratic Party.